

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 DAMASC 05264 081025Z
ACTION SS-25

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 05264

EXDIS

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, SY
SUBJECT: DETERIORATING HEALTH OF PRESIDENT HAFEZ AL-ASSAD

1. MAHMOUD EL-YOUSSEF, TAPLINE REPRESENTATIVE IN DAMASCUS FOR THIRTY YEARS WHO HAS EXCELLENT CONTACTS AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF THE REGIME, STATES THAT PRESIDENT HAFEZ AL-ASSAD DOES INDEED HAVE LEUKEMIA, AS WELL AS DIABETES. YOUSSEF SAYS THAT SOVIET DOCTORS WHO ARE ATTENDING ASSAD ESTIMATE THAT HE HAS BETWEEN SIX MONTHS AND ONE YEAR TO LIVE. WHEN I COMMENTED TO YOUSSEF THAT RUMORS CONCERNING THE PRESIDENT'S BAD HEALTH HAD BEEN RECEIVED WITH SKEPTICISM IN SOME QUARTERS, YOUSSEF STATED THAT HE IS SURE OF HIS FACTS.

2. YOUSSEF INDICATED THAT TOP SYRIAN LEADERS ARE AWARE
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OF THE FOREGOING AND ARE TAKING STEPS TO ESTABLISH A PRESIDENTIAL COUNCIL WHICH WOULD AIM AT FACILITATING A SMOOTH TRANSITION FOLLOWING ASSAD'S DEATH. ACCORDING TO YOUSSEF, THE COUNCIL WOULD SELECT A SUCCESSOR AND ENDEAVOR TO ASSURE AN ORDERLY TRANSFER OF POWER. HE MENTIONED THE FOLLOWING FOUR INDIVIDUALS AS PROJECTED KEY MEMBERS OF THIS COUNCIL: :OREIGN MINISTEE KHADDDM,

CHIEF OF STAFF SHIHABI, MOHAMMED HAIDAR, MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL COMMAND, AND KHULAYFAWI, FORMER PRIME MINISTER.

3. IN RESPONSE TO MY QUESTION AS TO WHO HE THOUGHT WOULD BE ASSAD'S SUCCESSOR, YOUSSEF EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT MINISTER OF DEFENSE T'LASS WOULD BECOME A PRESIDENTIAL FIGUREHEAD BUT THAT THE POWER BEHIND THE SCENE WOULD BE THE PRESIDENT'S BROTHER, RIF'AT AL-ASSAD. YOUSSEF DID NOT THINK THAT UNDER THE NEW LEADERSHIP SYRIAN POLICIES, EITHER DOMESTIC OR FOREIGN, WOULD CHANGE APPRECIABLY. ONE POSSIBLE EXCEPTION MIGHT BE A RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN SYRIA AND IRAQ. HE OBSERVED THAT SYRIA'S FORMER "POOR" NOW CONSTITUTE THE "RICH" IN THE FORM OF THE PARTY CADRE AND MILITARY OFFICER CLASS. THIS GROUP HAS A VESTED INTEREST IN MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO.

4. DESPITE PLANNED EFFORTS BY SYRIAN LEADERS TO SMOOTH THE WAY, YOUSSEF FORESAW A DANGEROUS VACUUM OCCURRING IN THE WAKE OF ASSAD'S DEMISE.

5. COMMENT: WE ARE PREPARED TO ACCEPT THAT PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD PROBABLY HAS LEUKEMIA, SINCE THIS REPORT IS SO WIDESPREAD IN AUTHORITATIVE CIRCLES. AT THE SAME TIME, IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT THE FRG AMBASSADOR TOLD ME THAT ASSAD REQUESTED NO MEDICAL CHECK-UPS
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DURING HIS UPCOMING TRIP TO WEST GERMANY AND EXPRESSED A DESIRE THAT HIS SCHEDULE BE A VERY FULL ONE. IN ANY CASE, I WOULD BE RELUCTANT TO ACCEPT AT FACE VALUE EL-YOUSSEF'S PROGNOSIS THAT ASSAD HAS ONLY SIX MONTHS TO ONE YEAR TO LIVE. I GATHER THAT THERE HAVE BEEN SOME BREAKTHROUGHS RE TREATMENT FOR THIS DISEASE AND, IN ADDITION, WE MUST NOT OVERLOOK THE CAPACITY OF STRONG AND DETERMINED LEADERS (SUCH AS BOURGUIBA, KENYATTA AND KING SAUD) TO FIGHT THE ODDS AND PROLONG THE INEVITABLE. OUR HUNCH IS THAT ASSAD WILL STILL BE AROUND A YEAR FROM NOW. THE EMBASSY IS IN THE PROCESS OF PREPARING AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF PRESIDENT ASSAD'S DEATH. SEELYE

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